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Chile: Political Normalization Measures

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President Pinochet's decision to advance the timetable for a transition to constitutional rule was made in response to continuing internal and external pressures on him to normalize political life in Chile. The announcement follows on the heels of other changes designed to improve the country's international image, including lifting the state of siege and the curfew as well as observing a more lenient policy toward the return of political exiles.

In a nationwide speech on 5 April, Pinochet unveiled plans to wind up work on a new constitution by the end of the year and to hold a plebiscite on it some time thereafter. This advances by five years the schedule he outlined last July. The announcement also marks an important policy shift by the Chilean leader, who had remarked after last January's referendum that no further voting would be necessary in Chile for 10 years.

Presumably, the investiture of an interim congress would take place at an early point in the transition process, with members designated initially by the junta. If the government adheres to earlier projections, the appointed congress would serve a four- or five-year term and then two-thirds of the legislators would be chosen through elections. The head of the constitutional reform commission has disclosed that a bicameral legislature would be established and that the new constitution would specify an eight-year presidential term. Pinochet did not mention presidential elections in his speech and was vague about the overall timing of the complete process. Nevertheless, his statement left the door open to even further modifications.

Although Pinochet emphasized that it is necessary for the armed forces to retain the "essence" of political power, he said civilians would share a larger role in government. He did not elaborate, but he may have

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been floating the idea of seeking cooperation from elements of the Christian Democratic Party, the country's largest, which was banned in March 1977. There has been no reaction as yet [REDACTED] but the Christian Democrats will be reluctant to participate as long as restrictions on open political activity remain in force.

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Among other measures raised in his speech, Pinochet offered a wide-ranging program to pardon or to commute the sentences of all prisoners convicted by military courts for violating national security laws before and after the 1973 coup. [REDACTED] as many as 224 persons stand to benefit immediately. The releases will also close the books for all practical purposes on most cases that have interested human rights groups.

Along with these steps to silence criticism of its human rights record, the government relented on still another front by agreeing to permit an on-site investigation by a representative of the International Labor Organization. The ILO has repeatedly deplored Chile's failure to provide information on arrested and disappeared persons in the labor movement.

Motivation for fresh initiatives to ease the government's hard-line policies can be attributed partly to pressures within the ruling junta for a more liberal



President Pinochet (c) and the Chilean Junta

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course and, more importantly, from key Army generals concerned about questions of legitimacy and improved relations with the United States. Pinochet now seems committed to a more rapid pace of eliminating repressive controls and restoring constitutional government. He is obviously hopeful that international recognition of this fact will be accorded to Chile. [REDACTED]

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